

Grodan is celebrating its 40th year. To mark this occasion the company wanted to contribute to the horticultural sector by organising the symposium:

Modern solutions for modern challenges

About the future of high-tech horticulture

Expert session for growers and propagators, 15 September 2009

The point of departure of the expert session was the balance between the requirements of society (in particular with regard to the environment) and the profitability of high-tech horticulture, both today and in the future. The expectations and implications of high-tech horticulture in the future were discussed.

Short summary of the results

Yield is most important

The general consensus in the group was that return is the most important factor at the present. Investments are only made if there are potential returns in the short term. The group believes that double standards are being applied (the Netherlands versus the world) and that the Netherlands is already well ahead with regard to the environment. They consider it important that the Netherlands stay in the lead.

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Efficient use of space and means ▪ Continuity of quality and supply ▪ Open culture with widespread knowledge exchange ▪ Entrepreneurs, creativity and solution-orientation of growers ▪ The Netherlands' image ▪ Close to the market ▪ Food safety ▪ Innovation: pioneering (we're great experimenters = strength) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Division in and fragmentation of sales market ▪ No recognizable product ▪ Products do not have the right image (mass production vs. craftsmanship) ▪ Insufficient market orientation ▪ Inflexible production process ▪ Innovation: pioneering (also a weakness because many experiments also fail and the risks are increasing) ▪ We are unable to communicate innovations
Opportunities	Threats
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Improve the image of the Dutch product (healthy, fresh, safe) – focus on food safety ▪ More flexible production (even more steerable) ▪ Continue environmental improvements (although much has already been achieved) ▪ Create our own communication to explain sustainability to the consumer ▪ New ways of cooperating and risk sharing between suppliers and growers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The progress with regard to innovation holds the Netherlands back at the same time ▪ Risks are increasing ▪ Sector's reserve with regard to investments ▪ Local for local (can also be an opportunity)

Themes for the future

The themes for the future were discussed on the basis of the above SWOT analysis. The group has difficulty defining the best direction: *“Too many different directions are being followed and none of them are producing sufficient returns”*. Communication towards the consumer plays an important role: *“The last really great innovation was CHP and we failed to communicate this effectively.”* The sector finds it difficult to explain the story about high-tech. Ongoing themes for the future are expected to be continued improvement of environmental care and clean and efficient production, greater flexibility in production and food safety: *“But we have achieved much already.”* Knowledge of the root zone is seen as important expertise for the future.

Possible approach

The general consensus is that the Dutch growers are already leading the market, out of necessity. Extra investments are barely financed, or not at all, while the risks are increasing (due to scale, critical investors and rapidly changing legislation). This leads to overcautiousness. New ways of cooperating in innovation (e.g. by sharing risks) between suppliers and growers may be the way to real growth.

Preconditions

The most important precondition is and remains a direct link between investments and return: *“The need to recover costs will only gain in importance.”* Effective communication (either direct towards the customer, or together with the retailers) on the theme of sustainability in relation to the high-tech horticultural sector is essential to eventually achieve these returns.